

ENCOUNTER WITH HINDUISM

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BROWSING IN A BOOKSHOP in Newbury, Berkshire, when I was just sixteen, I picked out from the shelves the Penguin selection from the Upaniṣads, translated by Juan Mascaro.¹ Around the same time I also discovered the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the poetic translation by Christopher Isherwood and Swami Prabhavananda.² Both translations were very free and academically unreliable, as I was to learn in later years. I was a fairly orthodox Christian, yet the vision of God I met in these texts (in a sense, the very looseness of the translations made them into new ‘texts’ in themselves) was one that I instantly felt I knew. It was a moment of *recognition*, not of theological argument. It did not even occur to me to wonder whether this was the same God I had been taught about in school and worshipped in church. At the same time, however, I recognised that the God revealed in these texts emerged out of a different world of ideas from my own and this was part of their fascination, as well as constituting what felt at the time like proof that this God was real.

Among the Upaniṣads, I liked best the *Śvetāśvatara*, the text that is considered the most theistic among them. The name, which means ‘white mules’ or ‘he who owns white mules’, probably belonged to a real person—one of the many names that occur throughout these texts, lending them a sense of living connection with a far distant age. A comparatively short text, it contains passages that, even in Mascaro’s translation, have technicalities, but it develops into a paean of praise to the God ‘who is hidden in all things’.³ The voice of the sage sings out: ‘I know that Spirit whose infinity is in all, who is ever one beyond Time ...’.⁴

¹ *The Upanishads*, translated by Juan Mascaro (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965). Mascaro does not number his verses, but I have imported the numbering given in all other translations.

² *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gīta*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (New York: Mentor, 1954).

³ *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 1.16, in *Upanishads*, translated by Mascaro, 87.

⁴ *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 2.21, in *Upanishads*, translated by Mascaro, 90.

I felt that Śvetāśvatara, whoever he had been, was a person who really *did* know the Spirit. I felt he had known the same God that I knew, albeit that I knew this God more dimly. Yet there were significant differences, for this other person who knew God did so in aspects for which my own tradition did not seem to find words. I had not heard the term ‘pantheism’, so was not troubled by it:

Thou this boy and thou this maiden; Thou this man, and thou this woman; Thou art this old man who supports himself on a staff; Thou the God who appears in forms infinite.

Thou the blue bird and thou the green bird; Thou the cloud which conceals the lightning and thou the seasons and the oceans.⁵

Later I could compare this with Gerard Manley Hopkins: ‘Christ plays in ten thousand places’.⁶ The meaning is not exactly the same, for Hopkins

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is thinking of the humanity of Christ glimpsed in all human beings and the Indian text does not distinguish here between the human and natural worlds: God is immanent in everything. It was precisely this sense of God’s immanent presence, both cosmic and intimate, which the text awakened in me and which remains with me even now, when I am near in age to the

old man ‘who supports himself on a staff’. My purpose here is to return to Śvetāśvatara with the explicit help of the reflective discipline of comparative theology.

Vedas and Upaniṣads

The Vedas—dating from around 1500 to 1000 BC—are collections of hymns, ritual instructions and speculations belonging to an ancient religion which is no longer practised; but they are nevertheless regarded by Hindus as the source of all their subsequent religious knowledge (*Veda* means ‘knowledge’). The Vedas portray a polytheistic world of worship with many deities associated with natural and cosmic forces. A commentarial tradition grew up over centuries on the original four Vedas. The Upaniṣads, the final section of these commentaries, are called *Vedānta*—meaning the end of the Veda. They date from around 800 to 200 BC, but again this is approximate. The generic term Veda covers all this literature, including

⁵ Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 4.3–4, in *Upanishads*, translated by Mascaro, 91.

⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, Sonnet 34, ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’, in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by W. H. Gardner (Oxford: OUP, 1979), 90.

the Upaniṣads, and the whole corpus is regarded as revealed scripture: that is, *śruti*, or 'heard', because it was originally transmitted orally.⁷

Brahman, *ātman* and *puruṣa*

The Upaniṣads contain commentaries, meditations and reinterpretations of Vedic ritual, directed inward towards consciousness, or what we might call mystical theology, rather than outward towards ritual practices. They include a metaphysical quest for cosmic unity or an ultimate reality, to which the name *Brahman* is eventually given. The culmination of the quest comes when *Brahman* is identified with *ātman*, the self. Hence comes the realisation that the self, the soul, is of one nature with the essence of all that exists. The upaniṣadic 'great sayings'—'That thou art' (*tat tvam asi*) and 'I am Brahman' (*Brahmāsmi*)—point to this insight. As Sara Grant phrases it: 'Realization ... is the discovery that the deepest Reality within oneself is the deepest Reality at the heart of all being'.⁸ It is powerfully and famously expressed in another of the 'great sayings', that of the sage Śāṅḍilya:

This is myself within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice, than a barley corn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet or the kernel of a grain of millet. This is myself within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the atmosphere, greater than the sky, greater than these worlds.⁹

The term *ātman* can refer either to the individual self or to the greater, higher or universal self—in the latter sense it becomes synonymous with *Brahman*. Another word used for the supreme principle is *puruṣa*, 'the Person'. R. C. Zaehner asks if any of these terms means the same as 'God'.

Person, Brahman ... and Atman ('Self') are, then, the three terms used more or less indiscriminately to represent the highest principle whether conceived as the spirit which indwells and controls the world or as that same spirit indwelling the heart of man. Is this spirit a personal God or an impersonal Absolute?

He answers that it is both. One important difference from Christianity he observes is that 'in Hinduism there is no *creatio ex nihilo*'.¹⁰ Instead, as

⁷ *The Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Valerie Roebuck (London: Penguin, 2003), xxiv–xxvi.

⁸ Sara Grant, *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2002), 37.

⁹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 3. 14. 3–4, in *The Principal Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by S. K. Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 391–392.

¹⁰ *Hindu Scriptures*, translated and edited by R. C. Zaehner (London: Dent, 1966), ix–x.

Valerie Roebuck explains, the language used ‘is that of emanation, begetting (or giving birth), or the ordering of a chaotic original material’. So where Christians speak of ‘the creation’, the Upaniṣads might refer instead to ‘all this’—*sarvam idam*, meaning the whole of the phenomenal world.¹¹ Nevertheless they do sometimes use the term ‘creator’. It might be more accurate to say that *Brahman*, *ātman* and *puruṣa* sometimes mean ‘God’, but not always. *Brahman* can mean simply ‘truth’ or ‘reality’, *ātman* simply ‘myself’, and *puruṣa* has a wide range of meanings.

Theism

The concept of a personal God as Supreme Principle (theism) became more prominent in six shorter Upaniṣads, later than the other major ones, which share certain ideas and verses in common, although with these too dating is uncertain.¹² These share new speculations connected with a philosophical school called *sāṃkhya*. *Sāṃkhya* posited two fundamental principles, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’. They are sometimes translated as ‘Man’ and ‘Nature’, although neither of these translations is quite accurate since the latter term incorporates the mind and the senses as well as matter. An important aspect of *sāṃkhya* is that nature or *prakṛti* is composed of three qualities called *guṇa*:

This primal matter, originally unmanifest, contains three qualities or strands (*guṇa*), goodness (*sattva*), energy (*rajas*) and darkness (*tamas*). The visible and manifest universe has proceeded from the original primal matter; the three qualities are distributed in different proportions within the various constituents of the universe.¹³

Each of these qualities is assigned a colour: white, red and black respectively. Only the Supreme Soul is ‘colourless’—that is, simple and not compounded of the three strands. For the individual soul in *sāṃkhya* ‘liberation’ is release from these three strands which constitute its material prison. This is achieved through early forms of yoga, whose philosophy is closely connected to *sāṃkhya*.

Why Śvetāśvatara?

Among these shorter Upaniṣads the *Śvetāśvatara* presents the clearest picture of a personal God as Supreme Being. Weaving between the *Vedānta*

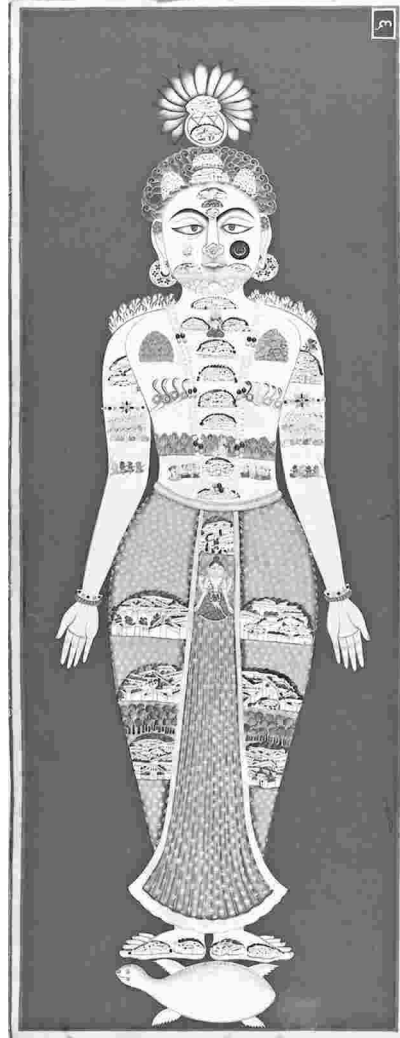
¹¹ *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, introduction, xxxi–xxxii.

¹² They are called ‘middle Upaniṣads’ to distinguish them from still later texts.

¹³ *Upaniṣads: A New Translation*, edited and translated by Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: OUP, 1996), xlviii.

ideas of *Brahman* and *ātman*, on the one hand, and *sāṃkhya*'s *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, on the other, it presents a theistic version of both, in which the deity or Supreme Soul is placed as a third term, producing a triad in place of a duality. *Śvetāśvatara* is all but unique in using the word *deva*, 'the god', 'almost in the sense of "God" with a capital G'; complete liberation comes by knowledge of, and devotion to, this God.¹⁴ Indeed, that liberation comes about 'by knowing God' is the great theme of this Upaniṣad, as we shall see.¹⁵

Nevertheless, it remains possible to read the text 'non-dualistically' if one chooses to—that is, according to the exegesis of the great Hindu theologian and philosopher Śaṅkarācārya, who composed commentaries on the Upaniṣads in the eighth century AD. He argued that there is no difference between any of the pairs mentioned above: between *Brahman* and *ātman* or between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. The apparent difference is due to illusion (which he called *māyā*). He thus allowed no separate reality either to an individual soul or to a personal God.¹⁶ This understanding, known as *Advaita* ('not two'), is the version of the soul's relation to God or *ātman* that many non-Hindus encounter when approaching Hinduism today. Śaṅkarācārya himself was distant from the earliest Upaniṣads by about a thousand years, but his interpretation is still authoritative for many today.



The Equivalence of Self and Universe,
by Bulaki, 1824

¹⁴ *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 447–448, editor's note to *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*.

¹⁵ See Dermot Killingley 'Notes on the Svetasvatara Upaniṣad' (unpublished).

¹⁶ See *Principal Upaniṣads*, 24–27.

Even Śaṅkarācārya, however, allowed for a personal God at a lower level of understanding.

Mariasusai Dhavamony calls the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* ‘the gateway of Hinduism’.¹⁷ Its theology prepares the way for future devotional (*bhakti*) sects, especially those that worship the deity Śiva as supreme being (Dhavamony’s special study). The *Śvetāśvatara*, indeed, sometimes invokes its ‘God’ as Śiva, but probably as an epithet (meaning ‘kindly’) rather than a name. Śvetāśvatara himself, of course (if we view him as a historical figure, as we probably can), does not look forward to later Hinduism; rather he looks back towards what for him is already an ancient tradition. He situates his own new teaching amid the old, quoting hymns and invoking deities from the Vedas which his hearers would have known, but reinterpreting, reshaping them. ‘I join the songs of olden times with adoration’, he sings.¹⁸ His is certainly not the last example of someone introducing something new by dressing it in old garments.

If one attempts the sort of textual parallel reading suggested by Francis Clooney, ‘not in the sense of lining things up and measuring them by yet another standard, but by following the pathways back and forth between the traditions we begin in and those we visit, once and many times’, the Christian texts that most spring to mind are some of the psalms and phrases from the liturgy, for this is a text of praise as well as a theological treatise.¹⁹ It includes a theophany which is taken up and elaborated in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the two texts have many similarities.²⁰

Why Mascaro?

Catherine Cornille, editor of a collection of Christian commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, warns of the dangers of appropriation, of assuming ‘hermeneutical privilege’, of ‘universalising’ by ignoring cultural context.²¹ It might seem unwise, therefore, to base my discussion here on a translation which is often a free paraphrase, mostly avoids Hindu terminology and aims at making the text universally available. I choose it mainly because it was the one that attracted me to *Śvetāśvatara* in the

¹⁷ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *The Love of God According to Śaiva Siddhanta: A Study in the Mysticism and Theology of Śaivism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 61.

¹⁸ *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 2.5, in *Upanishads*, translated by Mascaro, 87.

¹⁹ Francis Clooney, *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (Albany: SUNY, 1996), xviii.

²⁰ *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 448.

²¹ *Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gītā*, edited by Catherine Cornille (Leuven: Eerdmans, 2006), 4.

bookshop in Newbury, and because other translations, though technically more accurate, often fail to reveal the beauties of this text.

Juan Mascaro was born in Majorca but settled in England, where he studied Sanskrit at Cambridge University. In his introduction to the translation he treats the Upaniṣads as part of a universal spiritual heritage. He draws comparisons from a wide range of saints, mystics and poets including St Francis, William Blake and Rabindranath Tagore among many others. Poetry is allied to truth: ‘imagination and faith are one’, he writes.²² Thus he does exemplify some of the ethical issues raised by Cornille in the way he describes his motivation in the introduction: he appropriates by imposing his universalist ethic. I wish nevertheless to explore whether it is possible to read his translation honestly as a ‘work’ in the sense used by Paul Griffiths—‘as a stable and vastly rich resource, one that yields meaning, suggestions (or imperatives) for action, matter for aesthetic wonder, and much else’.²³

The poetic quality of Mascaro’s translation lends itself to such an approach, but in the detailed reading of part 4 that follows, I compare it with a range of scholarly versions, mainly relying on the more recent translations by Valerie Roebuck and Patrick Olivelle, with the notes and introductions to both, and Radhakrishnan’s *The Principal Upaniṣads*, which includes the Sanskrit text. I have found particularly helpful some unpublished notes on *Śvetāśvatara* which were kindly supplied to me by Dermot Killingley; they have also been used and acknowledged by Valerie Roebuck in her translation.²⁴

Part 4 of Śvetāśvatara: A Dialogue

Part 4, which contains the favourite passage quoted at the beginning, opens with four verses praising God who, in verse 1, unfolds Himself into the manifold world by distributing His ‘white radiance’ (literally, colourlessness) into the many colours of ‘creation’. This expresses divine simplicity: He is without attributes. In the Roebuck translation, He ‘gathers all together’ into Himself again ‘at the end and the beginning’. Thus He is both origin and end (alpha and omega). He is invoked to give ‘pure vision’; another translation has ‘clear understanding’ (*buddhi*: intuition).²⁵

²² *Upaniṣads*, translated by Mascaro, introduction, 27.

²³ Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 41.

²⁴ *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 448. These notes also inform chapters in *The Upaniṣads: A Complete Guide*, edited by Signe Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁵ *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 305; *Principal Upaniṣads*, 731.

In verse 2, ‘He is the sun, the moon and the stars; He is the fire, the waters and the wind; He is Brahma the creator of all; and Prajapati, the Lord of creation’ (two names of the Creator God in the Vedas). The word for ‘He’ here is actually ‘That’ (*tat*), but clearly means God; He is invoked with (and assumes the role of) the gods of the elements along with Brahmā and Prajāpati. The next two verses are those I quoted, and they address Him directly as *tvam* (thou).²⁶ In verse 3, He is in human beings. He is unborn (in Himself), but manifest in whatever is born in the world of becoming. Therefore all faces are His (*viśvatomukhah*: having faces everywhere, in every direction).²⁷ Earlier I compared verse 3 to a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins in its recognition of God in human beings. But does this have the same connotation of love for humanity as it has in Hopkins? We do not know, though the seed of such an idea is present in the Upaniṣads, through the perception of the universal Self (*ātman*) in every person. ‘Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear.’²⁸

Verses 2 and 3 are both quotations from Vedic hymns.²⁹ Verse 4 seems not to be a quotation, but continues in the same style, praising God’s cosmic omnipresence. Some translators question whether the ‘blue bird’ and the ‘green bird’ (*patangah*: flying creatures) are, in fact, birds or insects. Killingley suggests that the verse describes a random set of phenomena, all of which are manifestations of God—their colours contrasting with God’s colourlessness or ‘white radiance’ in verse 1.³⁰ Unborn and uncreated Himself, all worlds are born from Him. I wonder, however, whether there is also something more.

Verses 3 and 4 are the only place in this text where God is addressed as ‘Thou’, and the four verses together seem to be constructed as a hymn of praise. Generally, the Upaniṣads turn inwards to an analysis of consciousness, and the monistic search for unity leaves no room for praise. *Sāṃkhya* also places a very negative valuation on nature (*prakṛti*),³¹ and this is reflected in passages elsewhere in *Śvetāśvatara* that speak of it as a trap, such as the image of the soul lost in the great wheel of existence that occurs in the opening verses of part 1.³²

²⁶ Compare *tat tvam asi*—‘Thou art That’.

²⁷ *Principal Upaniṣads*, 732.

²⁸ *Īśā Upaniṣad*, 6, in *Upanishads*, translated by Juan Mascaro, 49.

²⁹ *Principal Upaniṣads*, 731. And see *Hindu Scriptures*, 23–26 (*Atharva Veda* 10.8, 27).

³⁰ Quoted in *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 455 note 4.

³¹ At least in this context. Some forms of *Sāṃkhya* see a more positive role for *prakṛti*.

³² ‘In this vast Wheel of creation wherein all things live and die, wanders round the human soul like a swan in restless flying, and she thinks that God is afar’: *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 1.1, in *Upanishads*, translated by Juan Mascaro, 87.

Yet Śvetāśvatara also expresses the earlier, more positive Vedic attitude to the natural world, and perhaps this is another aspect of his innovative teaching. Mascaro compares the Vedic relationship to nature with that of St Francis of Assisi, and quotes his Canticle of Brother Sun.³³ Roger Sorrell points to the innovation in St Francis' attitude by contrast to the Christian ascetic tradition.³⁴ For Saint Francis, Nature reflects God as God's creation; and for Śvetāśvatara it sometimes seems to do the same, as His emanation of Himself. For me, at any rate, reading these verses in Mascaro's translation evokes a sense of the divine presence in all things that recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God/It will flame out like shining from shook foil'.³⁵ Evelyn Underhill quotes the same lines to illustrate what she calls illuminated vision: 'the vision of ... an added significance and reality in the phenomenal world', which is 'sacramental, not ascetic'.³⁶

The next verses, however, return to nature as a trap. The three 'unborn ones' in verse 5, one of whom is 'bound by the pleasures of nature', are followed in verse 6 by a famous image of two birds on a tree: 'There are two birds, two sweet friends, who dwell on the self-same tree.



Detail from Rama Sita and Lakshmana at the Hermitage of Bharadvaja, 1780

³³ *Upanishads*, translated by Juan Mascaro, introduction, 8.

³⁴ See Roger Sorrell, *Saint Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes towards the Environment* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

³⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', in *Poems and Prose*, 27.

³⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 254.

The one eats the fruits thereof, and the other looks on in silence.’ Verse 7 interprets this ‘parable’: the first bird is a person—*puruṣa*, here meaning the individual soul—who engages with the world or nature (*prakṛti*), and feels powerless; but when it sees the ‘Other’, the ‘Lord’ (*Īśa*), it is freed from sorrow. We have here the triad: the Lord, the soul and ‘nature’ as separate. Alternatively, in a ‘non-dualist’ reading, there is but one soul in two aspects, a lower, bound to the objective universe, and a higher one that is free, having gone beyond it.³⁷ But either way, nature is bondage.

Verse 9 introduces the concept of *māyā* which, later on, in the philosophy of Śāṅkarācārya, came to denote the world-illusion. In *Śvetāśvatara* it does not have that connotation, but is associated with the magical net of the god Indra, mentioned in part 3.³⁸ The sense is of a conjuring trick. Most translations are not far from Mascaro’s ‘power of wonder’:

With Maya, his power of wonder, he made all things, and by Maya the human soul is bound. Know therefore that nature is Maya, but that God is the ruler of Maya; and that all beings in our universe are parts of his infinite splendour.

The Sanskrit says that the ‘great Lord’ (*Maheśvara*—later a name of Śiva) is the *māyīn*—the possessor of *māyā*, the one who wields it. Roebuck has ‘artifice’ with the Lord as the ‘artificer’; Olivelle has ‘illusion’ and ‘illusionist’.

Yet the conclusion of verse 10 has a more positive connotation: all beings in the world are ‘parts’ of Him—his ‘limbs’ (*awayava*). This supports the interpretation of the eleventh-century Hindu theologian Rāmānuja that the world is the ‘body of God’,³⁹ rather than merely an illusory appearance, or is likened to the ‘sparks’ from a fire.⁴⁰ Moreover, God is the ‘ruler’ of *māyā*; it is a power that He actively wields, coming as close, perhaps, as Hinduism gets to the Judaeo-Christian notion of God as creator; although here He does not ‘create’ but projects or emits (*srijate*) the world.

The rest of part 4 repeats the main themes of the text: that the Supreme Lord (God) is the source and origin of all the worlds; that He

³⁷ *Principal Upaniṣads*, 733.

³⁸ See Killingley, ‘Notes on the Svetasvatara Upaniṣad’, 9. *Indrajāla*—Indra’s net—is a word for magic, originally, in the Vedas, as a weapon to deceive enemies. It occurs in several places in the Upaniṣads as a metaphor for illusion.

³⁹ Dhavamony, *Love of God*, 230.

⁴⁰ *Mundaka Upaniṣad*, 2.1.1, in *Principal Upaniṣads*, 680.

is hidden in all beings and in the human mind and heart; that He is ineffable; that the vision of Him brings peace and immortality. The echoes from Vedic hymns continue; for example, in verse 13: 'Who is the God to whom we shall offer adoration?', is a partial quotation from *Ṛg Veda*.⁴¹ Verse 14 answers this question in phrases which are often repeated throughout the text, as Dermot Killingley puts it, 'like a refrain':

He is the god of forms infinite in whose glory all things are, smaller than the smallest atom, and yet the Creator of all, ever living in the mystery of his creation. In the vision of this God of love there is everlasting peace.

God is 'the god of forms infinite' (*aneka-rūpam*) because He takes on the forms of all things, in which he is hidden. 'In whose glory all things are' is more usually translated as embracing, enfolding or encompassing everything (*parivestitāram*);⁴² it recurs in verse 16 and elsewhere. It recalls the famous opening of the *Īśā Upaniṣad*: 'All this [*sarvam idam*] ... is enveloped by God'.⁴³ 'Ever living in the mystery of his creation': other translations do not have 'mystery', but rather 'confusion', 'disorder', 'chaos'.⁴⁴ By recognising Him in the midst of the chaos of the world, one attains perfect peace. Verse 16 revisits an earlier image of God as 'hidden in the heart of all things, even as cream is hidden in milk'. He is hidden as the most subtle quality of everything, on the analogy of clarified butter (*ghee*) being refined from milk. God is so subtle that He is like some substance even more refined than the *ghee*, hidden in the various forms of the universe.⁴⁵

Verse 18 echoes a Vedic hymn which describes the state before creation;⁴⁶ it recalls 'the glorious splendour' (*varenyam*) of the Vedic sun god Savitṛ, invoked earlier in part 2, in a prayer for inspiration.

There is a region beyond darkness where there is neither day nor night, nor what is, nor what is not. Only Śiva, the god of love, is there. It is the region of the glorious splendour of God from whom came

⁴¹ *Ṛg Veda*, 10. 121, 1, in *Hindu Scriptures*, 10: 'what God shall we revere with the oblation?'

⁴² Compare *Prinīpāl Upaniṣads*, 735; *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 307; *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Olivelle, 260.

⁴³ *Īśā Upaniṣad*, 1. 1, in *Prinīpāl Upaniṣads*, 567.

⁴⁴ *Prinīpāl Upaniṣads*, 735; *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Olivelle, 260; *Hindu Scriptures*, 211.

⁴⁵ *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 456 note 14.

⁴⁶ *Ṛg Veda*, 10. 129. 1–2, in *Hindu Scriptures*, 11–12: 'Then neither Being nor Not-being was No sign of night or day.'

the light of the sun, and from whom the ancient wisdom came in the beginning.

‘The god of love’, translates the epithet ‘Śiva the benign one’. He is ‘alone’—*kevala*—a technical term from *sāṃkhya* meaning utterly separate from nature or *prakṛti*.⁴⁷ Here, however, he is separate from the world because he is prior to it, and is about to ‘create’ it—emanate or project it—with the splendour of the sun. Wisdom, or intelligence, is born along with it from the beginning.

We know Him dwelling within us: ‘This is the God whose work is all the worlds, the supreme Soul who dwells for ever in the hearts of men. Those who know him through their hearts and their minds become immortal.’ Yet he is ineffable: ‘The mind cannot grasp him above, or below, or in the space between. With whom shall we compare him whose glory is the whole universe?’ The section ends with two more verses modelled on the Veda seeking protection from the fierce Vedic god Rudra (verses 21–22).

Resemblance and Otherness

I set out to revisit the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* in the translation which had first attracted me and to explore whether that early experience of recognition would change after comparison with more scholarly translations and commentaries. I wanted to see whether, once I knew more, I could still read *Śvetāśvatara* ‘religiously’.

I found that a closer look at the conceptual background, helped by previous academic study of Hinduism, greatly enhanced my understanding of its significance. As for whether Mascaro’s translation does it justice: I would answer a cautious ‘yes’. He offers a paraphrase rather than a literal rendering in order to avoid technicalities that would need explanation, but, on the whole, is faithful to the meaning, while the literary quality of his work succeeds in conveying the beauty of the text. It can be read as a meditation, for which the alternatives mostly would not serve.

Francis Clooney says that comparison begins ‘with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance’.⁴⁸ But resemblance comes amid otherness. *Śvetāśvatara* presented me with a God who was at once familiar and very

⁴⁷ *Upaniṣads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 451 note 32.

⁴⁸ Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 11.

different from what I knew because of the strong emphasis on immanence. A transcendent Supreme Being is amply evident in this text, as we have seen; it agrees with most of Aquinas' definitions except for 'creation out of nothing'.⁴⁹ There is a powerful dialectical relationship between transcendence and immanence, because of the deity's all-pervading nature. That, in turn, results from the idea that He is not wholly separate from creation, that He has evolved the world out of His own substance and therefore is indwelling in everything. Some call this 'pantheism', but that term excludes the dialectical relation with transcendence.

Śvetāśvatara is both a teaching and a praise text. It is possible that we actually see in it the emergence of a new concept of God. We perhaps witness the process of an epithet (*Śiva*) turning into the name of a deity.⁵⁰ We also possibly see the mythological and philosophical ideas around *puruṣa* turning into the awe-inspiring 'Supreme Person' as an object of worship. *Śvetāśvatara* weaves together different schools of thought with images and prayers from Vedic tradition in a creative synthesis. There is a strong note of praise, which resonates for a Christian with the psalms and the liturgy.

I had understood the verse that inspired me in the bookshop in Newbury—'Thou the blue bird ...' (4.4)—to be describing a mystical experience of God through nature. This seems to be contradicted by a generally negative valuation of embodiment in the material world, in which nature was seen as a trap for the soul. Yet the four verses placed together at the beginning of part 4 suggested to me a personal vision and an act of praise. The verses had the effect on me of a sacramental moment. As I read them in the bookshop, the blue bird became more blue, the green bird more green, the oceans more vast, the seasons more majestic and regular in their turning, because all these things were illuminated by God within. I took this to be an experience of 'Hinduism', but it might have been as much an experience of Christianity. This too, is a fruit of comparison, which Clooney suggests works like a mirror, 'by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other'.⁵¹ One sees what one could not see before in one's home tradition through one's journey into the other.

⁴⁹ Augustine Aranjaniyil, *The Idea of a Personal God in the Major Upanisads* (Bangalore: Gregorian Pontifical University, 1975), 103–113, lists references.

⁵⁰ *Upanisads*, edited and translated by Roebuck, 454 note 10.

⁵¹ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11.

The main place, however, where Śvetāśvatara directs us to find God is where all the *Upaniṣads* point: within the soul. It is by seeing God in the soul that one is released from sorrow, this sage says again and again. How far does the relation between the individual soul and God in this text seem akin to the Christian one? Is there projection on my part as a Christian reader? One has to be aware of such a temptation, and remain to some extent agnostic. We simply do not know very much about Śvetāśvatara's teaching, for this text is only a fragment. We do not know what ethics he taught, or how far the relation with God veered towards *bhakti* or devotion. One must also bear in mind the text's esoteric nature and its final injunction to secrecy: he did not intend us to read it.⁵²

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* seems to me to record a personal ecstatic vision of God in the soul and in nature. The words I would read alongside it are from the liturgy: 'Heaven and Earth are full of thy glory'. Whether that is what the sage Śvetāśvatara meant I can only really know if I meet him in the next life. I hope that I can.

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⁵² 'This supreme mystery of the Vedanta which was revealed in olden times must only be given to one whose heart is pure and who is a pupil or a son': *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 6.22, in *Upaniṣads*, translated by Juan Mascaro, 97.